Nostalgia Gaming: Why We Keep Going Back

Community NerdyBirdy Sep 21, 2021

Some of my most enduring childhood memories involve watching my older brother and sister play videogames on an old Super Nintendo in our shared bedroom. At the time, console gaming was still in its infancy, and most of the games of the time were relatively simple and unsophisticated. Side scrolling adventures, 2D fighters, and basic shooting games were the norm, with most of the games only a minor step up from the local arcade.

Then I saw them play *Chrono Trigger*. First released in 1995, *Chrono Trigger* was universally considered one of the greatest video games of its time, and acclaimed for its storytelling, narrative structure, battle mechanics and soundtrack. I had never seen a video game like it before. One that not only hooked you in with addictive engine building and battle mechanics but had an emotionally resonant storyline and intricate character development as well.

At the heart of *Chrono Trigger* was the question, can you change the past? The game's story explored questions of time travel, and whether one can truly fix or solve problems by addressing them in the past. For much of the game, the protagonist, and his party veer in and out of time in attempts to prevent disasters or fix past calamities. Unfortunately, the common lesson is that the past can never be truly changed, or even really lived in.

Videogames as a State of Being

A similar drive powers a new wave of gaming deliberately crafted towards a nostalgic past. Every gamer has found themselves at times, going back to the games of their childhood. A recent article by *Wired* documents several gamer's turn towards the games of their childhood during the stresses and disruptions of the past two years. There's a 25-year-old competitive gamer who finds herself spending her days playing Mario on the original Nintendo, or a psychologist going through the *Donkey Kong Country* series of Super Nintendo games.

I have gone through similar patterns in my own life. Whether in high school, college or as a working adult, I've often found myself playing games that were released decades ago. Like the characters in *Chrono Trigger*, I've discovered myself moving in and out of my past, albeit through a video game.

But what exactly is going on in the brain when nostalgia gaming?

According to Kenneth Woog, of the Computer Addiction Treatment Program, "gaming is strongly linked to the brain's reward pathways". He elaborates that "the reward pathways are more sensitive in children and adolescents than in adults. So, when these childhood games are played as adults, the pleasure response from the past adds to the current experience". Clay Routledge, a psychology professor at North Dakota State University further explains "When people are nostalgic, they are reflecting on personally significant or momentous past experiences. These memories also tend to be largely positive."

In this way, nostalgia gaming can be seen as a desire to relive the positive experiences of the past. Psychiatrist Michael Feldmeier described how looking back and drawing upon the past can help develop emotional resilience. "By looking at the past, one can sometimes look to the future even when bogged down by the pain of the present. If someone can be reminded of a better time, they may hold out hope for the future". In other words, we may not be able to escape our current worries and anxieties, but we can still pop in *Grand Theft Auto* or *Halo* and try to relive a more carefree time in our lives.

But ultimately, we may find ourselves learning the same lesson taught in *Chrono Trigger*. That the past is meant to be remembered, but not lived in. After describing the initial excitement that came with playing games such as *The Legend of Zelda* or *Super Mario Brothers*, Routledge states "It was an exciting time for all of us as we had never seen anything like this before and we had the freedom to just sit there together and take these games on. Now, when I play the same games they are not likely to fashion the same experience."

And so, nostalgia gaming in a way, is a search or drive for memories that cannot be lived again. It's perhaps fitting then that the very word for nostalgia comes from the Greek roots for "returning" and "suffering".

Video games are a uniquely powerful tool of memory recall. Many games feature all the elements of an emotionally resonant experience. Engaging writing and storytelling, memorable music and deep connections through extended gameplay are all features of great video games. Most games need at least twenty hours of gameplay to complete, and it's not unusual for games to require more than one hundred. When viewed in the full scope, it's not surprising that video games stay in our memories longer than many books, movies, or albums.

Capitalizing on Nostalgia Gaming

This desire to return to the past through gaming has driven the success of many retro-styled games. In 2016, Eric Barrone released *Stardew Valley*, a farming simulation game built on the famous 16-bit graphics aesthetic of the 80's and 90's. Based on the popular *Harvest Moon* series of games, *Stardew Valley* used a muted graphics palette, simple but engaging gameplay, and a storyline built on the search for a simpler life, to achieve incredible commercial success. In just four years, *Stardew Valley* sold over ten million copies.

Similarly, games such as *The Messenger*, *Celeste*, and *Sonic Mania* all used older and dated graphics and retro game designs to sell millions of copies across a variety of different gaming platforms. Game designers have even melded different eras of gaming to create completely new experiences. *Cuphead*, combines classic arcade shoot-em-up games with 1930's Disney style cartoon animations. Leaning fully into nostalgia gaming and the retro experience, *Cuphead* won several gaming awards and sold over six million copies in its first three years.

Moving through the Past and Future of Gaming

Nostalgia gaming is clearly a real and familiar exercise for millions of gamers. Each one of us has games that we find ourselves returning to, time and time again. And while it's always exciting to see each year's new games and advances, it's clear that gaming's past is still very much part of its future. Gaming will always be an incredibly active and dynamic industry. And the popularity of nostalgia gaming, as well as the rise of nostalgia-influenced retro games shows us that revisiting the past, is also a great way to imagine a new and creative future.

We all have our own *Chrono Trigger* or childhood games that we grew up with. What games do you turn to when you're feeling nostalgic, or looking to

relive old memories? Do you find that the experience of playing it has changed over time, or do you still feel the same emotions each time you play it? Do you feel the rise of nostalgia gaming reflects our current time and situation, or is a normal gaming experience?